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ABSTRACT

Noting that a reluctance to question some assumptions of social and behavior sciences is one reason for the halting progress in these fields, this book examines three potentially misleading ideas and reasons for their continued popularity. Chapter 1 critiques the idea that all behavior is influenced by one's psychological construction of the immediate situation, in turn influenced by objects and people in the perceptual field and by memories of the past. An indifference to the local influences on behavior has led some social scientists to write about psychological processes such as fear, consciousness, intelligence, and temperament as if they generalize broadly. Chapter 2 questions current faith in infant determinism, which holds that some experiences during the first 2 years of life are preserved indefinitely. Many early ideas or habits either vanish or undergo such serious transformation that they cannot be retrieved later. Impermanence of first structures is as likely as preservation, whether in evolution, psychological growth, or language. Reasons noted for the belief in infant determinism are that it has the illusion of being mechanistic, thereby making it easier to state a cause-effect sequence, renders a parent's first actions useful, is in accord with egalitarianism, and is sustained by the ambiguity of the phenomena studied by developmentalists. Chapter 3 addresses the assumption that most human action is motivated by a desire for sensory pleasure. Social scientists have awarded too much power to the desire to maximize self-interest and attain sensory pleasure, and not enough to the universal need to be kind, loyal, and loving. Most humans tend to be risk averse, and suppressing behaviors that might bring on guilt and shame serves a motive for virtue that is the basis of human morality. The book concludes by asserting that many psychological processes do not generalize broadly, that most adaptive adult characteristics are not determined by experiences in the first 2 years, and that the majority of daily decisions are issued in the service of gaining or maintaining a feeling of virtue. (Each chapter contains references.) (KB)

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